

Leaner lines of communication

Making information flow from top to bottom and back again keeps everyone on the same page and growing



By Elizabeth Petersen

Strong, well-informed teams help build successful businesses.

That's why nurseries, like other businesses, benefit when they encourage open, effective communication throughout their workforce. From managers to supervisors to leads and workers, conveying accurate communication greatly increases efficiency and job satisfaction. And ultimately, that's good for the bottom line.

But communication is more complicated than it might seem.

The exchange of ideas is inherently

imperfect and can be thwarted even in the best situations. Communicating involves sending and receiving information. The sender must convey meaning effectively in words, both spoken and written, and in actions. The receiver must interpret the intended meaning correctly.

Consequently, communication can break down at any interchange between individuals.

Remember the childhood game in which one person whispers a message to the next person who passes it on to the next? By the time the message had made its way through the chain, from

Communicating clear directions is critical in the nursery environment. Here, workers at Smith Gardens in Aurora, Oregon, use an over-the-ground trimmer to prune a crop of poinsettia plants.

PHOTO BY PETER SZYMCAK

ear to mouth to ear, the final iteration usually bore only a passing resemblance to the original message, and everybody would laugh.

But communication in a production nursery is no laughing matter. Any breakdown in communication can cost time, money or even harm.

A systematic approach to communicating information is needed to ensure ►

that messages maintain their integrity.

Obstacles to effective communication

Salvador Zamudio, owner of Applied Growth Transitions, has more than a decade of experience helping Northwest growers build teamwork and improve workplace communication.

When language and cultural differences complicate an effective exchange, Zamudio said, the process of sharing ideas becomes even more challenging.

“Especially in the green goods industry, it is important to structure the communications model to meet the demands of the employees,” he said. “Growers need to address multicultural differences within the structure of their business processes.”

Zamudio’s goal in working with management and workers is to set up

systems that allow messages to be transmitted with integrity.

By building structures and strategies that integrate bilingual — even multilingual — training programs into human resources development, communication between management and the workforce will improve.

Many of the men and women who labor in Oregon’s fields and greenhouses face language obstacles and unfamiliar cultural roles that inhibit open communication. One reason for this is that in the Hispanic culture, workers typically are not encouraged to question their direct bosses or engage those higher up.

If a worker’s immediate leader doesn’t know the answer to a question or concern, it is unlikely that the worker will pursue the issue to a person with more authority, Zamudio said.

Many Hispanic workers are hesitant

to make a comment or observation, particularly if it might be construed as a complaint. This kind of deference is meant as a measure of respect, but can actually contribute to misunderstandings and distrust. This can, in turn, cause production problems, resulting in lost time, added work and adverse financial impacts.

The goal of Zamudio’s training programs is to help businesses develop systems that remove the barriers to effective communication, so that teams become stronger and more successful.

Integrating a new model

In many businesses, messages and information travel in just one direction — from the executive/management group down to the workers.

This model, while functional, could work much better if a system was in place that could assure a given message



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travels along the chain of command intact. However, assuring that the message gets to its intended recipient intact is only part of a better model.

If there is no way for questions or suggestions to flow from the workforce back to management, useful feedback, observations and suggestions will probably be lost. The solution is to establish a loop of communication that allows for the easy flow of return messages to the top.

“It is important to maintain the integrity of the message both directions,” Zamudio said.

In such a systematic communication system, everyone shares information in prescribed ways. At every level, the message sender is responsible for having the recipient restate the message, so there is no confusion.

Here is the way Zamudio likes to see it work: a message generated by an executive must be clearly communicated to department managers both verbally and in writing with appropriate translations. Then, to confirm that the message has been understood correctly, the executive asks the department managers to repeat the instructions as they understand them.

At this point, corrections can be made and intentions clarified if needed. When the message has been verified, the department managers then pass on that message to the supervisors. Before the exchange is complete, supervisors, in turn, confirm the accuracy of the communication by repeating the instructions as they understand them.

Corrections and/or clarifications occur all along the way to ensure that the message maintains its integrity as it moves along to team leaders and the rest of the workforce.

Getting people to adopt these practices takes diligence, Zamudio said, because it requires more attention to detail. Plus, people bristle at what they perceive to be red tape and excessive procedure. “It can be hard to convince managers that having structures in place, deliberately defining direction as



Visual controls, such as multi-colored flags with English and Spanish, are used to communicate directions.
PHOTO BY PETER SZYMCAK

opposed to relying on happenstance, will make their jobs easier,” he said. “The highest priority is publishing systematic processes.”

When such systems are in place, things tend to run much more smoothly.

From training to practice

Wholesale grower Smith Gardens is headquartered in Bellingham, Washington, and has four growing operations on the West Coast. Putting systematic methods of communication into practice has contributed significantly to the company’s culture. It also folds in with the company’s dedication to the Lean philosophy, defined as “mobilizing the ingenuity of all our people to expose problems and address the causes at the roots.”

Wes Bailey, site manager at Smith Gardens in Aurora, Oregon, explained the challenge: “If management is not all on the same page, directions to workers can be confusing.” To minimize frustration and wasted efforts, and to instill a sense of pride among workers, clear directions are critical.

To continually improve, the management team at Smith Gardens meets weekly for updates from each department. They address issues based on the company’s vision and mission statement.

At this level, one obstacle to reaching solutions is that nobody wants to be blamed for a problem, so people can become defensive. To overcome that fear and be able to objectively solve production issues, members of the management team are asked to “Check your ego at the door, and quit taking it personally,” Bailey said.

“One thing we learned in our Lean training is that, when evaluating a process, it is not about the people, it is about the process. It is very important to emphasize that and let the staff know.” By eliminating the impression that people are the problems, objective analysis can take place and issues can be addressed and resolved.

“Management has to be willing to do the same work as the employees,” Bailey said. “By doing the work with them, we can relate to the challenges they face. ▶

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By asking for feedback and suggestions, every employee is encouraged to take ownership of any problem that may arise. Everyone helps with everything.

“At Smith Gardens, we strive to meet the needs of both external customers and ‘internal customers,’ those on another team whose job is to take our work products to the next level,” he explained.

For instance, plants go from the transplanters to the growers, and from the growers to the shipping team. It is everyone’s responsibility to make every effort to understand and facilitate the entire process.

Since multicultural communication is required, all supervisors and half the management team at Smith Gardens are bilingual. Documentation about procedures and processes for performing tasks is supplied in both English and Spanish with pictures. Visual controls, such as flags, are used to communicate directions too.

One in-house system, called Realistic Expectations (RE), assists with assigning jobs: work assignments are shared using both explanations and physical demonstrations. When someone in management assigns a task, he/she performs the task with the crew to assure better understanding of the task and the length of time it should take. By using RE, workers and managers see better results.

In addition, the company has now added a bilingual human resources coordinator whose job is to improve communication between workers and management. Workers can discuss issues confidentially, thereby overcoming the stigma of questioning the boss.

Communication is an ongoing challenge, but when employees understand what needs to be done and why, they do better jobs and feel valued. Likewise, managers and team leaders benefit from getting honest feedback from the people doing the work. ☺

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